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Cream Puff Pipe Dreams

MARY HELEN PÉREZ

HOUSTON, TEXAS

It was exhilarating when my father bought a wonderful cream-colored 1953 Chevy with curves like a voluptuous real Latina woman—full and round. Finally, we had a nice car and it was only 4 years old! Soon enough, my father was forced to use this cream-puff to literally whisk us away and move us out-of-town, an unbelievable feat for the likes of us. Our family had deeply-entrenched roots in our hometown of *mezquites*; we weren't going anywhere (nor did we have the money to do so). We couldn't even take a tempting quick ride to the sea and sand of Corpus Christi 30 miles away, yet once in a while my father would daydream that we would someday move to Portland, Oregon, light years away *en el norte*. We were not like some of the Kingsville Chicano families that followed the crops around the country; we were settled and stationary. Nonetheless, *Apá* (father) imagined a scenario that would transfer him to another job within the Missouri Pacific Railroad system in a faraway land. It was hard to believe we could possibly break away, but eventually my father was compelled to pull those *raíces* and shake off the Kingsville-earth when he got bumped in 1957. That meant he was laid off from his job, but was able to take another person's position with less seniority. *No hubo nada más que hacer*. He had to chase down another job even if he himself had to take someone else's job possibly in another town. It was the Year of the Dog, in other words, "dog-eat-dog" time. I'm sure it was traumatic for my parents; I, on the other hand, thought it was a wonderful turn of events. I was going to see the world! I had been a prospective "wanderlust" groupie for a while; I wanted to see stuff I'd read in books and seen in the movies. No one could wipe off the grin inside my head.

Mid-summer, we gathered all our *garritas* and rode out of town in a cloud of smoke and a hearty "Hi-yo, Silver" flight of fancy. That world waiting for us beyond those familiar trees would be wonderful, I projected. We traveled—my mother and father, and my brother Tuye and me—north on Highway 77, slicing Texas in half, farther than we had ever been before, passing town after little town with old houses lining the sides of the road,

smiling at our good fortune. About mid-trip, the road and the terrain started to take on a different look. The squatty mesquite trees from our past faded away in our dust and our fumes. We started to see lofty trees—pine trees I had never seen before. The road would go up, up, up and then it would take a big dip where the cream-puff could coast without burning any gas. The road took us up and down, up and down. This was new for Chicano flatlanders—as we went up we couldn't see anything but the pavement with a yellow stripe in the middle. Then as we rode the crest of the hill, I could see what I thought was the edge of the world—I could see all the way to the horizon in the distance—I could see what I thought were mountains beautifully outlined by a blue ridge on top. I was enthralled with these blue-ridge mountains. But as we got closer and closer, the mountains soon evaporated and turned out to be piney wood tree tops that vanished into an ashen-gray haze—a shadowy haze that matched our tenuous fairy-tale cream-puff pipe dreams.

We arrived at our destination: a sleepy little town called Taylor, in the Texas Hill Country loaded with signs flaunting Polish names crowning their businesses: Adamski's, Zelinski's, Palowski's, etc.¹ They were so proud of their names—I didn't get it—I had never heard of them before in the *barrio*, not even in books. "*Es un pueblo polaco*," said *Apá*. It seemed to me they were a slightly lighter shade than we were, but they acted like they owned the town—I guess because they did! They were a little gruff and unfriendly to alien-chocolate people like us. My father, in no time, gravitated toward the browner side of town. The cream-puff instinctively zoomed in on the Mexican Catholic church, Our Lady of Guadalupe, the nucleus of the Chicano neighborhood very reminiscent of Kingsville's *barrios*. At a tender thirteen I surmised all *barrios* were the same, sharing similar colors, sounds, smells *y humildad*. My father almost immediately pinpointed *una casita* to rent, a furnished house that belonged to the Anciras, a migrant family that was combing *el norte* for field jobs. We were practically touching a tidbit of heaven, I thought—the house was located catty-corner to the Mexican church and across the street from Doña

Trine's *tiendita*, stocked with cold drinks, candy and chips, important ingredients in a teenager's life. What fun, our house was in the hub of the *barrio* and even had a little chicken coop in the backyard that my father harvested each morning. My father loved a bargain, but this was even better—a freebie-perk. A pageant queen, an imposing rose bush in full bloom, resided in the front yard. The only flowers that had assembled in our dehydrated South Texas yard were wildflowers that suddenly peeked out of the earth whenever, wherever without any warning, and died back just as quickly. Things were coming up roses all right in Taylor, Texas.

YUNE, THE SAILOR

Yune (short for Junior), the going-places, doing things older brother, was off on summer maneuvers for the Naval Reserve. He had just graduated from high school and was planning to go to college. He could do some math problems that took up the whole page! He was impressive and resourceful and believed in magical thinking. As we settled into our new town, Yune, the sailor, would fittingly have to navigate his way to our new address on the planet. A week later he showed up at our new *tamañita casita* wearing his stiffly starched, summer sailor suit, brilliant white, and a sailor cap to match. He stood tall with his cleft chin high and his serviceman status shimmering. That afternoon into the night, the church practically sitting at our doorstep threw my brother an unexpected “welcome-home” party. The church was having a “*jamaica*,” a parish fundraising festival, and my brother, the sailor, capitalized on this. He cruised around the games, the booths, and the eateries all the while showing off his nautical regalia. I watched him as he took part in a courting-dance ritual on the church grounds, like a cocky peacock out to impress. A young lady that caught his eye took his bait that very night—Alvarita, whose name meant “the speaker of truth.” The very next day, Doña Trine's granddaughter from *la tiendita* across the street, who had developed an instant crush on Yune, eager to malign the competition out of transparent jealousy, befriended me and dropped a whisper in my ear with the bite of a million wasps. She claimed Yune's love-at-first-sight choice was holding a “secret” like an Ace of Hearts close to her chest. According to her but far from verified, Alvarita, my brother's first-day-in-town love interest, *se había huído con un muchacho*—she had “supposedly” run off with a

boy overnight but he had refused to marry her—a titanic social taboo among *la Raza* (the Hispanic community) at that time. *Barrio* people, by the way, were tightly united when they collectively scorned mal-doers—those who fell short and got caught. Chicanos were openly judgmental and unforgiving—they never let offenders off-the-hook, *eran muy fijos y qué*—folks had to pay for their transgressions, for going against the preachings *de la Santa Iglesia Católica*, period. I wrestled back and forth with my conscience about the sincerity of our green-eyed neighbor. Should I tell my brother or tuck it away in my heart? I think I tried to mention it to him at my insightful 13, but he was too far gone to listen. Isn't love great!

Had the sailor reeled in his favored fish or had the fish snagged the sought-after sailor? No matter, the catch lasted over 35 years until death knocked on their door way ahead of time.

TUYE, EL ENFERMITO

Tuye (short for Arturo) was in a health quandary when we went on our great family adventure. When he left Kingsville and Doctor Pease, he packed his illness and took it with him. He couldn't keep anything down because he didn't feel good—*tenía mucho asco*. When we all walked together *como patitos* up the wooden steps *de la tiendita*, mom asked Trine, the owner, if she could fry an egg with a *pancita* for my brother, *el enfermito*. Mom could take charge and handle awkward situations like that by making unconventional, almost embarrassing requests, no sweat. My brother's health took a nosedive in our new town of 10,000 plus *polacos*. My brother was suffering a mystifying affliction and no one could decipher a way out. I remember hearing that tests done at the local hospital suggested Tuye's kidneys were like slotted spoons, riddled with holes! Nonetheless, he along with me registered at our respective schools with our super report cards as passports into the new school system with only a handful of Chicanos.

APÁ AND THE CREAM-PUFF

Apá seemed to fall right in step with his new job, even though he had a bad taste in his mouth after taking his *comprade's* job, *a fuerzitas*. It was obvious to me it was the Year of the Dog. Apá opened up a charge account at a medium-sized *gringo* grocery store to get things on credit *a la Kingsville*: payment due every two weeks on

the most glorious day for *pobretones*, *el día de pago*. The best part of the new job: Apá was making more money than ever before because he was on-call. It was a blessing. The cream-puff came in handy to fetch Apá to and from work, and to haul groceries and us kids across town. Apá found a way to drive us to school in the mornings when the whole world was in a whirl, possibly on breacktime. Apá *todo el tiempo se las arreglaba*—he always found a way to maneuver a situation to his advantage or to take care of family needs—in a poor man's way, but he took care of us. From the air, the cream-puff could literally be seen chugging along, criss-crossing the grid of new streets, the brand new *veredas* in our lives. The puff would also in a jiffy glide Yune, the sailor, to school all the way to Georgetown, home of the Methodist Southwestern University Pirates, some 20–30 miles away, to tackle more page-long problems.

PETE WITH THE CROOKED FACE

Mid-September, when fall starts reaching out with its blue norther fingers, handed *Amá* (mother) an ominous telegram, the only telegram in our entire life. Only the few and the fancy had telephones. We were required to retrace our tire tracks back to Kingsville for my grandfather's funeral. My mother didn't shed a tear in front of us; she didn't say a word on the seven hour journey. It was a gray trip that Apá and the cream-puff couldn't handle. Our neighbor, Pete, with his newer Ford Fairlane took time off from his job with Swift & Company depluming turkeys, and led the entourage back to the holy lands of the Kingsville cemetery. Pete, with the crooked face (from Bell's palsy) *nos regaló* an unanticipated, benevolent service; he was simple yet beautiful, an obliging young man forever seared like a blazing brand on the hide of my memory. I'm sure Apá *le pasó* some *centavitos* for his trouble and the trip. Afterwards, we took Highway 77 northbound back to our new reality, our new job, our new stores with their new names, our new *barrio*, our new schools with a handful of Chicanos, and with our old family memories full of regrets strapped firmly onto our psyches minus one freshly buried member.

THE WHITE HOUSE

Pop scouted around and found a new and better house, almost a castle. He did it because *los Anciras*, the itinerant workers, were on the way back from their run of the country. Apá paid a trucker fifty dollars to fetch our

furniture from Kingsville for the handsome unfurnished house. The white house was across from the courthouse that was surrounded by old pecan trees one block off Main Street in a very White, upscale neighborhood. The white house with the nice broad porch, solid wood kitchen counters, French doors shielding the dining room, three bedrooms (mine with a swinging door) must have been in shock when the chocolate family took over with their *tiliches*; but she'd been lonely and abandoned for a while. The white house in the core of downtown took us in with the condition it would only be temporary. The proud old lady, the prestigious white house, lowered its standards for the love of a little gold. Of course, we could walk downtown to the movies, the drugstore where they sold the best chicken salad sandwiches, and an assortment of retail stores where along the way we could pick up big, pretty, free robust pecans to chomp on. This was pecan country and *grillo* country. We had front row seats when an overwhelming plague of black crickets blanketed the downtown section of Main Street and disappeared the very next day, except for the dead carcasses. The white house nestled in the heart of downtown put us where all the White action was, and we fit right in because my father had a steady job. Or so I thought.

THE RUG

By November, the weave of our fairy-tale fantasy began to unravel. *Amá* still had her hands full with Tuye, *el enfermito*. His condition was unrelenting. Everything was glaringly grim—Tuye, the budding genius, was so *débil*, so weak he was forced to drop out from Taylor High School after 6 weeks, even though he had marched with the Taylor Duck band and churned out straight A's on his first report card. His stomach, or something I couldn't understand, was having his lunch; he was a scary pale, emaciated washout.

In a somewhat similar vein, my junior-high school outlook was outright abysmal—I felt outnumbered by *gringos polacos* and totally out-of-place with red heads and *gringas güeritas* with forced curls, poles apart from what I knew in my hometown. The classes were made up of small groups of White students that I scrutinized and studied like a science lesson. Teachers couldn't even pronounce my very Mexican name (María Elena), much less pay attention to the new Mexican Ramírez girl among the "R-skis." Weak teacher substitutes were harassed by the outlandish behavior and inexcusable passive-aggressive

outbursts of *gringo* students challenging authority. I was demoralized by the dismal state of affairs and for the first time wasn't interested in my school work, as Sputnik circled in outer space around the Earth. Even though I made friends with a few Chicano students, I was on strike and didn't want to participate. This school of foreigners and its people were stomping on my pride and snuffing out my motivation. I responded with a form of self-hazing—I was being initiated into the blues, Taylor-made blues just for me.

And then one day for the final small-town, big-time blow, the rug was swept right out from under my father's feet. It was an unforgiving time and once again Apá was "bumped" out of his job by someone with more rank in years. Our story in Taylor, Texas, the Central Texas railway hub, was transitory—a July to December romance. We had come so far for so little. Apá's hopes for stability and job security along with the giant expectations of the entire family were dashed at the knees *de repente*. Without delay, *la familia's* optimism, like sand that simply slips out of watery hands, was hastily suspended and plans and newfound friends were put on hold. Amá was obligated to travel back to Kingsville and Dr. Pease ahead on the train with Tuye, *el enfermito*, because he was so very *enfermito*. How do you pick up your rags and get out-of-town like a mama bandit on the run? I can't imagine how Mom managed—she never went anywhere without my father, a very Chicana thing at that time. I wondered if she had the key to the dusty four room house surrounded by squatty trees and occasional wild flowers we had left behind trying to snare a job in a town of *polacos* in the Texas Hill Country. We had traded Kingsville for Taylorsville, as it was called originally, but it didn't work.

All this quickly doused Yune's college plans. He was the first to go to college, but given the circumstances it was short-lived—a disappointing false start. He was compelled to make arrangements to drop out of the school with long problems. In addition, he apparently owed money for the one semester, consequently his transcript was all but literally frozen. It took years and years and my father's capital to unravel this dilemma and breathe new life into his original dreams. *Dinero* that we didn't have, I soon found out, was king in the game of higher education. Yune, disillusioned and crestfallen, felt his life was coming undone. He was floundering in a sea of emotions—going back to Kingsville would mean no college, no money, no girlfriend, no job. He couldn't

pull himself out of so many negatives. He would have to run away from his thwarted plans and fairytales—by "stopping out" of college, leaving the Naval Reserves, and slipping into the arms of the Air Force. Eight months later, though, he would eventually send for his girlfriend, the speaker of truth, to marry. Isn't love great!

We hung around long enough to wrap things up, Apá, Yune and I. The house was so sad and gray without Mom, the cook and the true axis of our family life. Apá somehow packed what was left, gathered the furniture, turned over the white house keys, and quietly skipped out of town still owing *la cuenta* at the grocery store and the doctor that hadn't really helped my brother, my father said as he rationalized his objectionable actions. He gambled that they wouldn't bother to track him down and would just take the loss. He had paid so well, otherwise. Apá did what he had to do in order to survive, like most other red-blooded Chicanos would have done. Chicanos can't allow anything as piddling as *pena* to get in the way; it's a conventional part of the survival instincts of Chicanos like us.

It seemed like we had just gotten off Taylor's imaginary red carpet as we were driving away all packed up in our cream-puff. The Blue Ridge Mountains experiment of the summer of 1957 was a huge disappointment, full of distress, defeat and disenchantment. Nonetheless, the trip to nowhere-land gave us a taste of another life, beat us in the gut, and then we got up as Chicanos usually do, almost intact, and left. Many more twists and turns and new adventures were waiting down the road, but the cream-puff wouldn't be a part of it. My father sold the cream-puff—our cohort, our friend that saw us through a time that almost toppled the family. Even though it got us out of Dodge in time, it turned out to be a lemon. And as it whimpered away in "sold" dejection, it made my heart hurt.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The Central Texas area was settled in the 19th century by German, Czech and Polish immigrants. See: <www.texasalmanac.com/topicsculture/polish/polish-texans>.